



How to create a dynamic EU debate during the reflection period

Experiences from a road-show held in Denmark September 12 – 13 2005 “The moment of truth – Europe after the Constitutional Treaty”

The reflection period can easily lead to nothing but a pause in reflecting. New ground has to be created, if initiatives shall reach beyond “the usual suspects”. But it would be a waste of time to start from scratch in all respects. This report on a recent project in Denmark gives an example of what can be done if financial support is made available.

The road-show aimed at being a dynamic cross border initiative. The debates in Spain, France and the Netherlands were mostly national. In Denmark the EU has been widely discussed since the Danish no to the Maastricht Treaty, but also here the EU debate has first and foremost been national. Thus the road-show is an example of how the national debates could be given a European dimension.

Partners

The Road Show was initiated by the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) in partnership with the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) and The European Policy Institutes Network (EPIN), and in cooperation with a number of Danish university associations and schools.

Participants

Younger EU experts from leading research and policy institutes in Europe:

Carlos Closa (Spanish), Centre for Political and Constitutional Studies, Madrid

Daniel Keohane (Irish), Centre for European Reform, London

Sebastian Kurpas (German), Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels

Chair: Anne Mette Vestergaard (Danish), DIIS, Copenhagen

Coordinator: Anna de Klauman (Danish), DIIS, Copenhagen

Financial support

The project would not have been possible without a financial contribution from the *Board for European Debate in Denmark*. The total expenditure amounted to approximately 20.000 euro. Half of this amount was covered by the grant from the Board (flight tickets, transport in Denmark, meals, accommodations, fees for participants and one month wage for the coordinator) the other half being co-financed as part of the ordinary DIIS budget (mainly costs for staff and overheads).

Programme

During two very intensive days the participants visited a Danish high school, Copenhagen Business School and student associations at Copenhagen University and Aarhus University. The overall impression is very successful. In total 720 persons attended the debate meetings; cf. the attached programme for further details. A meeting with the Danish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and a few interviews with the written and electronic press added to the success.

General impressions

The EPIN network was a useful tool in getting the right people to accept the invitation. By inviting participants from other EU member states, the road-show introduced new dimensions into the Danish debate on the future of Europe and it proved to be possible to create a lively cross border discussion. The project succeeded in bringing the EU debate closer to a broader audience beyond the “usual suspects”.

The road-show was a win-win project: Not only the audiences benefited from the debates, the participants also found the project very fruitful in professional terms. Debating this rather new topic helped them to define and develop their arguments. It also gave them an insight in the Danish EU affairs and debate culture that can inspire future work.

The press coverage was acceptable, but more press coverage could have been expected had it not been for the postponement of the Danish referendum planned for September 27. It is therefore a nice illustration of the difficulties in triggering attention from media when there is no vote in sight.

Lessons learned

- Consensual pro-European debates are counter-productive. The panel should reflect different standpoints. When making financial resources available, it has to be accepted that an open debate among citizens will necessarily also lead to arguments that governments and EU institutions will dislike.
- EU research and policy institutes can play an important role during the reflection period. Simply by adding content to the debate. A debate for the sake of the debate does not make sense.
- Highly developed communication skills are necessary when the same panel has to tackle very different audiences, from teenagers and “ordinary people to some of the very best EU journalists, civil servants and university students. It was very fruitful that the participants illustrated their arguments with personal stories and concrete examples of the role of the EU in their home country.
- Obviously the debate needs some kind of structure. This is even more important during the period of reflection where all sorts of interesting dilemmas seem to be up in the air. This panel developed a format, where each panellist had 2 minutes to argue whether the Constitutional Treaty was dead or alive and then each had 5 minutes to talk about possible scenarios for the future of Europe. After less than half an hour the floor was opened for questions.
- The panellist had received rather detailed instructions in advance. It could have been an advantage to put even more emphasis on preparations – even rehearsal could be considered.

- The first debate could have been more exiting if differences among the participants had been emphasized more – as it was the case at the later events.
- It created a lively atmosphere that the chair had been in close contact with the panellists in advance and chaired all the debates – except for the first one at the high school.
- It is most valuable to organise such events with already existing schools and organisations. It guarantees an interested public. This project was based on already existing audiences (schools, associations and DIIS' own distribution lists, webpage and press releases). Experience from previous DIIS events indicates that an even larger audience could probably have been reached if money for advertising in newspapers had been granted. In this specific case it could have been useful in Aarhus, whereas the auditorium in Copenhagen was already crowded.
- The high school pupils were very well prepared. They posed highly qualified questions to the panel and the level of discipline was impressive. It was, however, extremely difficult to create a nuanced dialogue with such a big audience. Indeed, it is a special challenge to catch the attention of teenagers when you are not a professional politician or entertainer. Should there be a next time at a high school the audience would have to be down sized remarkably. 500 pupils are too many – 100 or 150 should be a maximum. It could also improve the dialogue if the panellist could walk around among the pupils instead of being situated on a remote stage.

Ideas for the future

Similar road-shows could be copied in other EU member states with due respect to national traditions. In Denmark it proved particularly fruitful to organise a public debate with a mixed audience (University of Copenhagen).

EU experts couldn't possibly reach every high school in the EU. But experts who are able to communicate could have a role in "training the trainees". In this case the preparatory EU role play was very successful. EU experts could train high school teachers to carry out similar role plays with their classes. Another obvious possibility would be to let EU experts train young students to take up the task – building on the experiences of the Danish Youth Council in training "Europe agents" (information can be obtained by writing a mail to youropa@duf.dk).